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# THE CGPA STRATEGY

**They** say never ask a woman her age and a BITSian her/his CGPA. The first adage has changed ever so slightly - It is just as true for men nowadays. And some women (at least yours faithfully) proudly talk of their mid-life crisis.

Back in the younger days when I joined BITS, more due to societal expectations (gotta be doctor or an engineer; didn't matter what I really wanted), the first issue that confronted me on day 2 in Pilani was: "Ok, I'm here. What's next?"

Now I have friends who knew that this was their chosen vocation from Day 1 and I envy their focus and their choices. Things were a little different for me, so I had to devise a strategy for survival. Sure, I was very happy with MMS. But what about the first two crucial years where we all did the same courses and competed with one another for academic acclaim? For all of us high achievers, the proof of the pudding was in the eating and nothing other than our CGPA was expected to reveal our intellect to our peers, our parents, prospective employers and potentially directors of admissions at far-flung universities.

Most students sincerely attended classes. Some had a quest for knowledge. A few had a desire for fun. A minority did extremely well, the majority was average, and a few messed up, I suspect, for a multiplicity of reasons.

I rue my lack of sincerity that caused me to sidestep the opportunity of plunging myself into "a sea of learning", and instead began scheming on a strategy to "get by" instead. My goals were razor focused. I would enjoy BITS thoroughly and focus my learning only on my D-courses. I would get a great CGPA in those courses, and showcase it to employers to land a fantastic job.

What about the noble quest for knowledge? That certainly wasn't for me!

The funny part is I have been asked by a school in India to develop a course as a visiting faculty on Corporate Strategy. As you will see, it is a subject after my own heart. For Strategy was a critical component of my CGPA plan.

I made a decision that touching a CGPA of 8.5 sounded good to me. I carefully analyzed the shortest possible route to get there at the beginning of each semester. I worked out how much I needed for an A, a B or even that dreaded C towards the end of the semester and calculated accordingly for the last test or compre. I extended that model to the entire semester and all the courses. I worked out the not-so-complex math (even for MMS graduates), multiplying x A's, y B's and z C's with the various weightings to arrive at a final CGPA. With a rudimentary idea about the content and level of difficulty of the courses, I allocated the grades! I was in business.

My strategy was religion to me, and it was critical that I did not stray from my carefully crafted plan. It wasn't all smooth sailing. One time I was very embarrassed when I entered the compre for an exam where I had already made my targeted 'B' grade. I didn't spend any time studying for the compre (boo hoo!), and instead had decided to focus on the 'A' I needed to get on the exam the next day.

My plan of action was straightforward. I would just write my name and depart. The Professor, who really liked me, and thought I very was good at his subject (which I was) unfortunately came to invigilate his exam. Now there was no way I could leave without him noticing!

What could I do? Well, I wrote my name, peered at him and then fiddled with my pen. I decorated my name. What now? How much can I decorate my name - I was no calligraphy expert. About twenty minutes into the 3-hour exam, I turned in an answer sheet with hardly anything in it, except for my rather well-decorated name. He looked puzzled as I gathered my things and walked up to him and stuck out my answer sheet. He grabbed the paper, and his face fell as he flipped through the blank pages. "You should reconsider" he said firmly. I gave him a sheepish smile, apologized and crept out of the classroom feeling like a worm, one of the lower strata worms at that. The look of deep disappointment in his eyes seared a hole forever into my

mortal soul that day. Even though I was the young and carefree type, who could easily shrug off these things, I was affected. On some grey, depressing mornings, I think about that day.

And now even more deviousness creeps in...

How do you combine all these grades with extreme fun? I rely on a learning technique called short-term memory or working memory – an active system for temporarily storing and manipulating information needed in the execution of complex cognitive tasks (e.g., quizzes, tests, comprees, learning, reasoning, and comprehension where the first and last three were, to me, mutually exclusive).

It is generally considered that some or all memories pass from a short-term to a long-term store after a small period of time. This is referred to as the "modal model" detailed coincidentally, in 1968, the year of my birth, by Atkinson and Shiffrin. Little did they know that it would become the cornerstone of learning for millions of students around the world. The exact mechanism by which this transfer takes place from short term to permanent is a controversial study in cognitive psychology.

But for me, it was a simple solution – no transfers! I would retain nothing. Unless it happened unwittingly. Or in the rather rare instance when the subject matter was fascinating. Like – good grief, Optimization Techniques!

So, I would just study through the night before the exam with extreme concentration, take the test, and then come back and sleep. And when I would wake up, bingo! I would have forgotten a great deal of what I had learnt the night before. For what remained, it was like the decline on a bell shaped curve, almost like sliding down to nothing. I may have hardly attended a class but the night before, I would enjoy every bit of the course. Till the day after! And my fresh, empty mind was ready like a dry sponge to take on the next exam, the next all-nighter.

Of course some glimmerings of knowledge remain. If somebody says Electronics Lab, I will immediately say, "And", "Or", "Nand", "Nor". I might even say "Gates". I will look bright behind my spectacles and try to hide my grin.

Aging and amnesia is supposed to destroy short term memory in any case. And I can prove that theory. I am a living, breathing example. I don't even remember how many things I have forgotten.

Except for my MMS D-courses and other relevant subjects. There I was like any other fiercely committed individual, inclined to fraudulent activity – but never with D-courses. And my strategy sure reflects that I was fit for MMS (!)

Friends, BITSians and fellow countrypeople, I am happy to say that I met my CGPA goal. It amazes me today that these naïve techniques actually worked.

During my ruminations about what I learnt (or didn't) in the four years at BITS, my sister often comforts me. She teaches Math, and is one of those brighter ones who actually learnt something. She says that some part of education is not meant to be retained but rather is required to modify our brain patterns, skills and some such hogwash! She says, "Maybe, you learnt to be street smart!" Or she puts forward the other great argument – you go to school to learn the ability to learn.

But I know that my deviousness came at a cost. When I talk to my daughter now about the importance of gaining knowledge over grades, I feel that I am talking out of the lack of experience of this noble feeling. When I faced my class at SP Jain (where I taught briefly) and held forth on the same, my insincerity was reflected in their blank stares. If I had my BITSian life to live again, I would be more sincere about learning something – and more importantly, retaining it. BITS was a great experience that I enjoyed tremendously. I just know that I could have made the classroom portion of it more meaningful.

*Disclaimer: When criminals write novels, they allegedly give ideas to people. I don't mean to and the analogy may be reasonably apt but the intention is merely to share my extensive experience in the field. And by the grace of the Lord Almighty, no profound Professor of mine will ever set eyes on this article. Gulp! ♦*